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IMPROVING SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

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IMPROVING SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

Educators in the National Coalition for Equality in Learning are discovering that a realistic understanding of the progress and problems of our present and past educational efforts is necessary for new attempts at school improvements to be constructive and lasting. Unfortunately, many current reformers present very little evidence to support allegations of the inadequacies of American schools, nor do they present evidence to indicate the probable effectiveness of their proposed reforms. What do we know about the effectiveness of American schools in stimulating and guiding the desired learning of children and youth?

THE PROGRESS OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

We know that the educational environments of the thousands of local schools vary widely. For example, there are schools in rural, city, and suburban areas. Children in city slums encounter different challenges and different problems from those in affluent suburbs. Children of migrant farm workers, moving with their parents several times during a school year, may find a different environment in each school they attend. In spite of these wide variations, the census reports that in 1980, 70 per cent of American youth graduated from high school. In 1910, half of all American children had dropped out of school by the time they had completed

the fifth grade, 10 per cent graduated from high school and three per cent were college graduates. In 1980, more than 28 per cent were enrolled in college. No other nation has such a large fraction of their youth continuing their education after completing the elementary school.

We know that an increasing proportion of American adults are able to read simple material like newspaper items or directions for

use of tools. At the time of the American Revolution, historians estimate, from the proportion of documents signed by an "X" for those who couldn't read, that only 15 per cent of white Americans could read simple material. In 1918, when two million young men were drafted to serve in the American Expeditionary Force in World War I, they were given reading tests. Thirty-five per cent of them could read simple material. Similar tests in

World War II indicated that 55 per cent could read simple material.

The last report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates that 80 per cent of 17 year olds can read simple material.

Many children in America are in families that have recently migrated from Latin

America, Asia, and Eastern Europe where they have had little schooling. In California, studies have been made of the progress of the education of those children. Many first generation Americans experienced much difficulty in their school work; the second generation did better, and the third generation could not be distinguished in their school performance from children of families that have resided in America for many generations.

While we cannot ignore the fact that many children still experience barriers to their educational progress, we must also recognize the unprecedented achievements of American schools in educating the vast majority of their students.

These studies indicate that, on the whole, American schools have done quite well in reaching a great variety of students and helping them to learn what schools are commonly expected to teach. While we cannot ignore the fact that many children still experience barriers to their educational progress, we must also recognize the unprecedented achievements of American schools in educating the vast majority of their students.

THE FUNCTION OF AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Yet the task of American public schools is to do much more than help children to learn to read. The purpose of public education in a democracy is to help students learn what is required to be an informed and responsible citizen in a democratic society. As Thomas Jefferson stated in his plan for public education in Virginia after the Revolutionary War:

"Every citizen is now both ruler and ruled. Our country will break down if we are ruled by ignorant and irresponsible citizens. Public education is necessary for the Nation's survival." To help children learn to be informed and responsible citizens in a democratic society is a more difficult educational task than learning to do what is expected of the common people in an authoritarian society.

A child begins to learn citizenship

behavior in the home and the local community. But many families and local communities do not provide opportunities for their children to learn to be informed and responsible citizens. American schools now enroll thousands of children who have recently migrated from countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia where their parents have not had the opportunities for learning what is required to be informed and responsible citizens in America. Many of these families are unable to provide the home environment that supports their children's education in American schools. Education for American citizenship requires students to learn to be self-directed and accept responsibility for their performance. It emphasizes exploration of new ideas and reflective examination of them and their consequences, rather than continuing uncritically their habits and practices. Many parents do not understand these objectives of American schools and do not provide a home environment that is helpful in supporting this kind of learning.

NO SIMPLE PANACEA

Faced with the large task of developing school programs that help students to become informed and responsible citizens, some educators and others interested in education propose to reconstruct American education. But this wholesale rebuilding of the American

schools would require significant changes in the thinking of vast numbers of teachers and parents, changes in their practices, and in the school curriculum. In the past, such efforts have failed. A review of school improvement efforts since 1900 indicates that efforts at reforms through new national, state, or even school district programs get attention in the press and in national and state conventions, but very little changes in the classrooms or in the homes, or even in the local communities where the actual teaching and learning goes on. School reforms designed from the top and passed down to teachers and parents may stimulate an effort by teachers and parents to carry out these proposed reforms, but they are soon discontinued. Most schools have not identified the problems the reforms are proposed to solve. Many reforms require extensive retraining of teachers and students, the development of new ways for parents to assist, and a period of six or eight years to get them in operation. Most reform proposals cannot be implemented easily and quickly.

SUCCESSFUL IMPROVEMENTS

Successful efforts at improvement of schools participating in the National Coalition for Equality in Learning have been brought about by focused efforts of teachers and parents of the local school to attack one or two important

problems at a time. Principals and supervisors have stimulated and guided them, and college professors have often lent assistance. District superintendents and boards of education have usually encouraged the efforts at the school site and kept the public informed of the developing programs. It seems essential that teachers and parents at the local school identify problems, seek to understand them, and devise and try out solutions. Successful efforts have worked from the "bottom up" rather than the "top down."

Educational changes like other social changes take place one or two steps at a time. They are slow, but they can be stimulated and guided to increase their effectiveness. Most of them have been developed at local schools where teachers and parents have recognized difficulties their children are encountering in their efforts to learn. Because of the wide variations in students, in local situations, and in available resources, the programs that prove effective are different in different schools.

Recognizing the need for the local school to work on its own educational problems, recent Illinois legislation provides for a great deal of local responsibility for each of the 500 Chicago public schools. The legislation places the responsibility for the management of each school in the hands of a committee of five — the principal, two teachers elected by the teachers, and two parents elected by the parents. This provides an opportunity for each school to seek to identify problems that seem

to interfere with the learning of the students in that school, and to attack the problems with the resources that can be obtained in that school community. If each school community will take advantage of the new power and responsibility, school improvement should proceed with deliberate speed rather than at its present very slow pace.

IMPROVING THE LEARNING OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS

Successful efforts to solve the learning problems of students have been based on the identification of particular problems of particular students, just as the successful attacks on the problems of local schools have been focused on the particular problems of the local school. In each of the school settings, there are some conditions that facilitate the students learning what the schools are expected to teach and some that impede such learning. The inner city may be viewed by some parents and their children as a slum from which they can escape by education that enables them to get well-paying jobs. In such cases, the inner city setting may create an

incentive for students' learning. On the other hand, the slum may be viewed as a permanent location for the family from which they can never escape, so going on to high school graduation makes no sense to them. In any one of these situations, there are children who are learning what the schools are expected to teach and children who are not learning many of these things. I emphasize learning what the schools are expected to teach because all children, except those who are severely brain-damaged, are learning something all the time. Learning is as natural for a human being as breathing. Every child starts learning at birth what is required for survival. Children having difficulty learning in school may be successful in learning situations outside the school, such as riding a bicycle or collecting the right

amount of money from the homes where they deliver newspapers.

Each of the family backgrounds from which our students come may have a different effect upon their learning. In

some families, the parents have been college graduates for many generations and expect their children to follow the same educational pattern. Some of those children want to go through college, while some rebel against their family's expectations. Some parents believe that they have come to America to have the

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opportunities for a good education which was not available to them in their homeland. On the other hand, some immigrants feel alienated and want their children to learn to be like the adults in their home country. Their different parental aspirations make a difference in the attitudes their children bring to the school curriculum.

The most varied of the factors that influence school learning is the student. All children entering the school have developed knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, habits, skills, and practices that are in some respects different from those of any other child. Some of these characteristics facilitate their constructive development, while some impede it.

The National Coalition for Equality in Learning believes, I think correctly, that understanding how these characteristics are affecting the school learning of a student will help the teachers and parents to work out a possible solution to identified problems.

These illustrations are sufficient, I think, to remind us that generalized knowledge alone is not adequate to provide understanding of a student's problems in school learning. When students are having difficulties, it is necessary to study those students and the conditions that seriously affect their learning. Too many of us observe a few symptoms

and classify the student as a "slow learner, low track student" or as "brain disabled" without seeking to understand the student as a unique person with assets as well as limitations.

Much the same argument can be made for solutions to the learning problems of students. All students have particular resources on which to draw, such as a desire to be successful in school learning, confidence that they can overcome the difficulties encountered, experience teaching younger children infor-

mally in the home or on the playground. Each situation also has different external resources to help the student, such as volunteer tutors, libraries, museums, or youth clubs. In many cases, a solution can be developed by creative use of these external resources.

When a plan has been developed for the pilot testing of the proposed solution, it should be put into practice and carefully monitored to see if students are now making substantial progress in their learning. If difficulties persist, check to see if the proposed solution is actually being implemented, and seek additional information to help gain more adequate understanding of the difficulties. Where additional information suggests a need for modifying the solution, the revision should be tried out. I have found that sometimes the proposed solution was not really tried out, and

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in other cases the trial suggested desirable revisions.

The time and effort consumed in analyzing a student's serious learning problems and developing solutions may seem very wasteful; but every student in a democratic society should have ample opportunity to learn what the schools are expected to teach. In our democratic society we, as teachers, are morally responsible for helping all students become informed and responsible citizens and to begin and/or continue their growth toward a productive and happy life.

I have learned that serious problems in school learning cannot be understood or solved on the basis of abstract generalizations or by emulating the analyses and solutions proposed by others. I have also learned that a careful study of each particular case can provide sufficient understanding of the problems to devise an effective solution. Teachers, parents, and students have within themselves the potential for solving their problems. Education in America has made substantial progress since I was born in 1902, and we can look forward to helping an increasing proportion of our students to learn well in school.

NOTE TO READERS

The National Coalition for Equality in Learning publishes discussion papers that center on our commitment to equal and quality education. These papers are written with an emphasis on real issues for improving schools and increasing learning. They are distributed to colleagues in National Coalition schools and beyond. The issues examined in the papers are debated. The exchange of ideas encourages thinking and action for constructive and enduring educational change.

The National Coalition for Equality in Learning is an effort to help all children of all families receive a quality education on equal terms. The National Coalition consists of about eighty diverse elementary and secondary schools in ten locations across the United States. It is a laboratory for experimentation. Through local action, we are discovering how educators, parents, and members of the community may help more students reach higher levels of learning. We are particularly concerned about those youngsters who, for various reasons, are marginal and not benefiting from their school experiences.

We are learning that bringing together local schools and their immediate communities to identify problems and pursue solutions can be an invigorating and renewing process. The history of educational reform tells us what does not work; we believe that we are discovering what does work.

As our experience becomes part of accumulated wisdom, we would like to make it available to others, to use as they will, so they may learn from example even as the example itself evolves.

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